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## **Reforms Continue Despite Hurricanes' Disruption *State Seeks New Orleanians' Input on Juvenile Justice Reform Strategies***

BATON ROUGE, La. – Saying that it is more important now than ever before to focus on Louisiana's families and youth, the head of the agency charged with reforming Louisiana's juvenile justice system said Friday he is pressing forward with the state's planned reforms.

Office of Youth Development Deputy Secretary Simon Gonsoulin said his office is making direct appeals to New Orleans-area residents for input on proposed strategies. The agency criss-crossed the state this summer holding 10 public meetings to allow Louisianans to help shape Governor Kathleen Babineaux Blanco's reform plan which is scheduled for release later this year. About 1,500 people participated. An 11<sup>th</sup> and final meeting scheduled for New Orleans in September had to be canceled as a result of Hurricane Katrina.

Gonsoulin's office has posted the comments gathered at the public meetings on the agency's website at [www.oyd.louisiana.gov](http://www.oyd.louisiana.gov). He is sending letters to New Orleans-area juvenile judges, family advocates, district attorneys, educators, social service workers, non-profit agency representatives and others urging them to go to give their input online, via fax or mail.

"Louisiana is committed to improving its system. We were making progress prior to the hurricanes, and we owe it to the public to continue. We needed an effective youth development system before. We need it now more than ever," Gonsoulin said.

"Families have been affected by these disasters in ways that we simply can't calculate right now. Any time there is stress on the family, there is stress on the child. These reforms are essential to help us develop programs to assist families and youth and to keep them out of the juvenile justice system," Gonsoulin said. "We need to do everything in our power to increase opportunities for youth so they can contribute to the future of this state."

Louisiana is under legislative and federal court mandate to reform its juvenile justice system. The reforms gained momentum two years ago when the Legislature passed the Juvenile Justice Reform Act of 2003. Last year, in one of her first actions as governor, Blanco made juvenile justice reform a top priority of her administration by ordering the separation of the Office of Youth Development from the Department of Public Safety and Corrections. This change underscored the new emphasis of juvenile justice in Louisiana from corrections to one centered on the treatment and rehabilitation of youth.

OYD serves about 5,000 youth in community-based programs, parole and probation programs and at secure care facilities including Jetson Center for Youth near Baton Rouge, Bridge City Center for Youth near New Orleans, and Swanson Center for Youth in Monroe.